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Introduction

Why read documents from the Holocaust? What do these details matter now? Contemporary society has become so numbed to violence by its repetition and its constant portrayal, that the Holocaust is sometimes seen as just another historical nightmare, to be acknowledged but also avoided.

For many years two justifications for more public attention to the Holocaust have been strongly voiced. Fighting the lies of deniers and preventing further genocide were powerful reasons to investigate, write, and read, to unearth new information and to examine what is already known. Neither of these reasons retains its former potency. While deniers continue to be loud and active, especially through new electronic media, they have not succeeded in convincing more than a few ideologues, motivated by the same hatreds as the Nazis themselves. In the person of David Irving, as persuasive and knowledgeable as any denier, they have been decisively repudiated in court by the exposure of their claims as deliberately spurious. Irving was unmasked by the prolific historian Richard Evans, who assembled a vast array of documents to demonstrate Irving's lies in a British courtroom.¹

'Never again' as a wish for humanity and for Jews continues to encourage teaching the Holocaust to young people. I, too, believe that education can hinder genocide and that confrontation with the Holocaust as history is part of a humane education. But the example of the Holocaust has not prevented late 20th-century governments around the world from displaying a repeated willingness to kill their own citizens and their neighbors. Learning about genocide seems inadequate to prevent further killings.

I put forward a third reason to know the Holocaust: as one of the most extraordinary events of human history, we must examine the Holocaust as part of the study of human society, our examination of ourselves. More people may have died in other government-sponsored programs of negative social engineering. Yet the Holocaust stands out, and maybe will always stand out, for its central charac-

teristics: the gradual development of an ideology which justified killing all Jews; the variety of other social groups also targeted for death; the deliberate invention and fastidious organization of efficient procedures of mass murder; and the willingness of its perpetrators to engage in serial killings. Because Germany was such an exemplary modern society, developed an outstanding educational system, and produced an extraordinary culture, its descent into a national program of violence has shaken our faith in the inevitability of progress. The participation of so many people in murder and the capacity of so many more to watch it happen disclose crucial aspects of human society and the modern personality.

No single method of inquiry can adequately understand the place of the Holocaust in modern life. Nearly every discipline has been affected by the knowledge about the Holocaust provided by eyewitnesses and historians, and each uses its chosen tools and attitudes to respond. For example, psychologists have made repeated attempts to investigate the elements of the modern personality which might have contributed to the willingness of individuals to inflict so much suffering on strangers.²

Historians respond by emphasizing documents, in the broadest sense, as the source of further knowledge and the basis for all understanding. Historical interpretations are judged by their relationship to documentary evidence. Historians work at two sometimes antithetical tasks: constructing interpretations which best fit the known documents and finding more documents which have not been analyzed.

There are already more Holocaust documents available than any person could read in a lifetime. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem estimates that it possesses 55 million pages of unpublished documents; major archives, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, keep growing, and unknown documents are discovered every year.³ Vast collections of documents are available, which helped me to choose this small sample. I publish here only a small portion of what I have seen, a collection designed to provoke further reading.

The importance of documents can be illustrated by a central question which has divided historians: who ordered the Holocaust and when was that order given? For decades Adolf Hitler was the focus of these questions. Few of history's dictators have been so proud of the idea that their will alone ruled vast territories. In *Mein Kampf*, written while he was in prison in 1923–1924, Hitler declared that absolute dictatorship was Germanic destiny; he insisted that he was the long-awaited savior of Aryan racial superiority.⁴ Yet historians have searched in vain since the end of World War II for a document in which Hitler explicitly orders genocide.

A Hitler order would shed crucial light into the murky world of Nazi decision-making. It appears, however, that no such order will be found, since Hitler preferred to conceal his actions behind bombastic speech-making and vague oral commands to his subordinates, who then fought each other for authority. In that absence, two schools of interpretation have developed,

based partially on differing claims about when and by whom the decision for the Holocaust was initiated.⁵ So-called functionalists argue that the steady intensification of persecution, including murder, led to genocide without a previously decisive intention. Intentionalists counter that Hitler's announced desire to get rid of the Jewish race, supported by many willing helpers, was the critical motor of genocidal actions. Both sides in this argument deploy interpretations of documents to support their contentions.

Because I believe that familiarity with original sources should inform every judgment about the Holocaust, I have prepared this collection for a wide general audience. Some well known documents, like the Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor (document 13), appear here because they speak to the reader of significant moments. Other sources came to official notice after the war in preparation for the Nuremberg trials, but have remained unfamiliar, such as Viktor Brack's proposal to sterilize millions of Jews (document 44). Some have recently been discovered or translated by historians, such as the Bulgarian protest against deportations (document 50). Read together, these sources should complete the most direct portrayal of the Holocaust that is feasible in one volume.

Some possible themes are not represented in this collection by specific documents. It would take many volumes to convey the richness of the Jewish life in Europe which was wiped out, but I have chosen not to do that here. The appeal of National Socialism to ordinary Germans or the development of Adolf Hitler's peculiar fanaticisms are not addressed. Hitler himself remains in the background in this book. The reader seeking more information about him has no shortage of choices. Many historians and many others have clearly explained his personal role in announcing, creating, and leading the Holocaust, although some intriguing elements of his personal life remain uncertain.⁶ I wish to draw attention to many other participants, from Heinrich Himmler to Viktor Brack and Odilo Globocnik, whose roles were also crucial.

Half of the documents in this volume come out of the Holocaust itself, the intensely and intently murderous period from 1939 through 1945. That selection could be multiplied many times, but still would not touch on all the issues, events, or persons that historians think are significant. The central and longest section, the 28 documents in Section VI about killing people, mostly Jews, displays the themes which governed my choices. I wished to draw attention to the sheer breadth of the event we call the Holocaust. Killing and decisions about killing were carried out in every corner of the continent, and I include documents from France and Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Ukraine. Eastern Europe is at the center, and the United States appears only once, at the periphery, where it remained until 1945. The geography of the Holocaust varied across regions and borders, city and countryside, time and culture. I chose here to stress the unifying forces and experiences which characterized the killing period.

The other half of the sources in this collection are sprinkled through the last two thousand years. I became a historian because I shared this discipline's fundamental belief that any phenomenon, however large or small, is embedded in its own history. Although concentrated in a brief period, the Holocaust looms in modern history as a central event, not because historians study it, but because its presence is felt in so many places. Those who practice history seek antecedents and causes in human society, sometimes arguing that events can be connected over the centuries. The first three sections of documents present three overlapping contexts within which the Holocaust developed: the long history of Christian antisemitism, the development among Germans of a vicious and public hatred for Jews during the 19th century, and the rapid escalation of attacks on political and biological enemies by the Nazi state after 1933.

As the Holocaust recedes in time, it has seemed to increase in significance. In most countries of Europe and North America, but also in many countries throughout the world, more attention is paid to the Holocaust than at any time since 1945. Modern society continues to generate voluntary organizations which link the Holocaust to their unique concerns. The final two sections present a few hints about the role played by knowledge of the Holocaust in contemporary political life.

How should one read these documents? Although I have shortened many of these documents, I have not tried to present only the key words or paragraphs. The combination of banal details and discussions of genocide is a characteristic of Nazi communications which I have preserved here. Reading documents requires careful attention to words and tone, to the interests of the writer, to the intended audience. A document's meaning often is revealed only by relating it to other documents, by wondering at the choice of language, by seeing what was not said. If we are to reconstruct the behavior and ideas of complex human actors from a few words on paper, then we must work hard at their reading.

The language of Nazi documents, especially about Jews, is peculiarly dichotomous. Public propaganda in Germany was vivid and vicious, as in documents 16 and 41. Official state plans, such as documents 27 and 42, used a very different language in addressing mass murder: bloodless vocabulary, passive voice, formulaic constructions, euphemistic descriptions. The deliberate Nazi invention of a new German dialect to obscure the reality of their deeds makes the reading of their documents especially difficult. In his manual on the interpretation of Holocaust documents, the dean of Holocaust studies, Raul Hilberg, pays particular attention to Nazi style.⁷ This manner of discussing killing is one clue to what the Nazis thought about what they were doing.

I have chosen to do my own translations from the German originals where possible. I have found that existing translations frequently display arbitrary distortions of the original texts: not merely unsuitable words chosen to repre-

sent the original, but also omissions of phrases, changes in sentence structure, alterations of word order. Some translations were done in great haste, such as the Army translations of captured documents in preparation for the Nuremberg trials. Others may have introduced these changes for aesthetic reasons. I believe that such changes ultimately distort the meaning of the text and the intent of the author. My efforts at providing more accurate translations are meant to display as much as possible the precise linguistic choices, grammatical structures, even tone and cadence of the original sources. Few of these writers were accomplished prose stylists, but they all had a style of their own, influenced by their situation and intent. I have tried to minimize the inevitable loss of translation, to allow the writing styles of these authors to help the reader understand their purposes and attitudes. I have reproduced their efforts to use format, spacing, underlining, and capitalization to convey their messages.

I have placed short commentaries after each document, which taken together provide an outline of the Holocaust. The reader should first confront the documents as they are and seek the meanings they contain. The commentaries are designed to offer context and information rather than prescriptions for reading. I hope that the commentaries will bring the reader back to the document again, for a second or third reading. Many of these documents continued to yield insight for me long after I had become intimately familiar with their contents. Historians understand the labor of interpretation as extending over years, involving both conscious inquiry and subconscious rumination. Every careful reader can participate in this human drive to understand and explain.

My commentaries reflect my own historically produced idiosyncracies. My family's connection to the Holocaust was in open view as I grew up, in the form of Chinese sculptures, notably sitting Buddhas, that my Viennese grandparents brought back from their exile in Shanghai after the war. I was aware and proud of my father's ability to speak flawless English after his arrival as a refugee in the United States. I also avoided facing the Holocaust. Only as an adult did I realize how much the Holocaust meant in their lives and in mine. By that time my thought process had been disciplined by the study and teaching of history. So that is how I have approached the Holocaust, channeling sadness and anger into an effort to deepen and spread knowledge. This effort alleviates some of the pain of knowing and some of the frustration at the difficulty of changing human culture.

There are many groups of victims here. Jews are the most prominent; they are accompanied by Gypsies, homosexuals, the handicapped, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Russians, and Catholic Poles. The killers made careful distinctions among the objects of their violence, but killed them with the same methods in the same places. I hope that this approach makes visible the differences in their treatment, while highlighting the broad ideology which envisioned mass

murder as the correct method for dealing with all of these groups. In this book, the Holocaust encompasses the killing of many millions of unarmed men, women, and children, in which Jews were the most significant target.

Even after decades of study, I am still shocked at the humanly constructed ideas expressed in these sources. I cannot imagine coming to the end of this book without more questions, which can only be answered by seeing more documents. There are so many gaps in the coverage and hints about what is missing. This book is not meant to be the last word on any subject or to prove anything. I have tried to illustrate and exemplify, not demonstrate or debate. This book is most useful as part of a broader program of reading memoirs, watching videotaped interviews, talking with survivors, and absorbing historical scholarship. I hope that it meets our need to learn more about how and why men in Germany wanted to kill and then killed so many men and women, war veterans and children, pregnant women and infants, and kept on killing until they were forced to stop.

Notes

- ¹ Richard Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
- ² The psychologist Stanley Milgram made an extremely disturbing film about his experiments, in which he duped volunteers into thinking they were delivering potentially fatal shocks to other volunteers: Stanley Milgram, *Obedience* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1969).
- ³ For example, in 1997, documents were found that showed that banks in Brazil and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York had taken possession of assets stolen from Holocaust victims: *The Holocaust Chronicle* (Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, Ltd.: 2001), p. 694.
- ⁴ In an accessible paperback version, Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), for example on p. 443.
- ⁵ An example of how the selection of a particular date for the decision is connected to a broader interpretation of Nazi policy is given by Eberhard Jäckel in 'The Holocaust: Where We Are, Where We Need to Go', in Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (eds), *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 23–9.
- ⁶ A combination of a fascination with evil and the impulse to sell may be the reason that unlikely arguments about Hitler attract so much attention: Hitler was partly Jewish, Hitler was gay, Hitler was a sexual pervert. Less exciting, but much more useful is the best recent biography by Ian Kershaw in two volumes, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* and *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999 and 2000).
- ⁷ Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001). The particular use of the German language by Nazis was addressed by Victor Klemperer, the Jewish philologist who survived in Dresden, in a 1957 book, now available in English as *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI – Lingua Tertiæ Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady (London: Continuum, 2002). Very useful to me for translation was Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch / Nazi-German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002).

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